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BOOK REVIEWS

Irving S. Saposnik. *Robert Louis Stevenson*. New York. Twayne Publishers, Inc. 1974. 164 pp. \$6.95

In his preface, Irving S. Saposnik recalls how some time ago he "bemoaned the lack of valuable Stevenson criticism" and, determined to "fill the void," decided to write a balanced, comprehensive study which would, above all, "make people read Stevenson" (7). His view of the criticism is hard to share, considering that there exist good books on Stevenson by G. K. Chesterton, Janet Adam Smith, Stephen Gwynn, David Daiches, Edwin Eigner, and Robert Kiely—and articles on his works by many others beginning with Henry James and Arthur Conan Doyle. But the greatest defect of this study is that with an aim so commendable—Stevenson very much deserves careful reading, probing, and re-examination—the author should have come so far short of realizing it. An introductory sketch of Stevenson's life is followed by six chapters of criticism—one apiece on the essays, the plays, the poems, the short stories, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and the novels—a brief summation, footnotes, and a short bibliography. Everything is covered in some fashion. But unfortunately this book, quite without the author's intending it, makes an excellent case for *not* reading Stevenson. Let me try to explain why.

First, it cannot be stated too emphatically that there are literally dozens of errors, of fact and detail, throughout. Names, titles, and dates of publication seem persistently hard for this author to get right. It may not matter that Stevenson's essay on Whitman is really called "The Gospel According to *Walt* Whitman," or that "A Gossip on Romance" really appeared in 1882. But surely the author of any study of Stevenson should know, and write as if he does, that Stevenson's cousin Bob was named Robert *Alan* Mowbray Stevenson—and not deprive him of his second name five times in the text and a sixth time in the index. It is perhaps unimportant that the editor of Stevenson's poems and his correspondence with Henry James draws her second name not from the second American President but from the Scottish philosopher; but even if he is uncertain just when Janet Adam Smith's edition of the *Collected Poems* (1950) first

appeared, it is the second, revised edition (1972) the author should cite in any event.

These errors are typical; and only some of them, as far as I can see, can be blamed on mechanical causes such as printing. There are many others, some of them serious. The author tells us, for example, that Stevenson's "knowledge of drama" when he and Henley began revising *Deacon Brodie* in 1878 derived only from Skelt's juvenile drama and private theatricals, "not from actual stage production" (37). But one of the great pleasures which Stevenson had enjoyed earlier that very year was going to Paris as Fleeming Jenkin's private secretary—throughout which interval, as Graham Balfour writes, both men enjoyed nothing more than indulging "their taste for the theatre." Stevenson's ignorance of staged drama may well be shown, unintentionally, in "Salvini's Macbeth"—an essay which this author nowhere discusses and mentions only obliquely in a footnote—but the fact remains that he had written and published it in *The Academy* eighteen months before he and Henley returned to *Deacon Brodie* in 1878. Here the missing or skipped information directly misleads. It is simply false to assert that Stevenson's knowledge of the drama in 1878 did not derive from "actual stage production." It did. Nor is accuracy any better served by the further claim, in the same paragraph, that by contrast Henley really was an expert—especially not when this claim is supported by observing that in 1878 Henley was "already editor and dramatic critic of *London*," a periodical which in fact lasted altogether two years and ten weeks and was always in straits both for contributors and financially. The entire contrast is most inaccurately founded.

These matters of fact are not unimportant. One good way *not* to "make people read Stevenson" is to give them the impression, as this author is not alone among recent commentators in doing, that those who do read Stevenson read and write so carelessly that they blunder incessantly on matters of fact. Careless scholarship suggests careless criticism and probably careless judgment. There are at least 40 errors (or uncorrected misprints) in this short study of 164 pages: far too many to leave a very favorable impression of the author's attitude toward matters of fact.

A second way to persuade people not to read Stevenson, or any author, is to prevent him from speaking for himself. Direct quotation is extremely under-used in this study, a procedure which appears

to me as unwise tactically as it is indefensible on literary grounds. "Aes Triplex," for example, is commended to our attention by the following means:

[Here] a contextual scheme is predicated upon the establishment of anti-theses whose ambivalences make possible their eventual denial. To oppose life and death in an initial rigidity is to open the way for flexibility, for the introduction of contradictory experience whose practical realities cannot help but broaden the absoluteness of the theoretical. Stevenson's intention is to reduce the force of the constrictively theoretical by presenting actual practice sufficient to contradict the accepted position. (24)

All of this may be true; but as Stevenson remarked of modern science in "Pan's Pipes," it is all written "as if with the cold finger of a stárfish . . . what is it when compared to the reality of which it discourses?" Even if over-conceptualizing were not inherently dangerous, it is an especially curious approach to take toward Stevenson's work, so much of which appeals by the immediate, surface qualities of the writing itself, by its specificity, its concision, its concreteness, and by its telling use of metaphor and illustrative detail. This study spends a lot of its time in the clouds.

A third way to persuade people not to read an author is to speak ill of his works. One is almost oppressively aware of the critic in this study—or rather, of the critic's own determination to be keen, even trenchant, on limitations where others have merely praised before. As a result, it is hard to say whether the author perceives any strengths, so little willing does he appear to explain or discuss them. Consider his remarks on the stories. The early ones, "A Lodging for the Night," "The Sire de Malétroit's Door," and "Providence and the Guitar" in particular, "have about them the coldness of rational discourse and the mechanical rigidity of their inspiration" (71–72). "The Merry Men" shows some advance "in fictional technique" but like other stories of its period "it remains strikingly incomplete" (84). "The Bottle Imp" and "The Isle of Voices" can both be dismissed confidently, as they are on the same page, as merely "conventional narratives whose settings are more a matter of convenience than necessity." Only "The Beach of Falesá" is much worth discussing among Stevenson's stories in the 1890s. Even setting aside the question of tactics, there is a real problem with all this trenchancy. The reader is left stranded. All he gets is the inert remark that Stevenson's reputation "rests on his unquestioned abilities as a story-

teller" (60) and then a string of contrary observations whose main effect is to occasion wonder that this could ever have been so. By the look of it—though the author says otherwise—the reputation is almost completely *unjustified*. What are we to believe?

Fourth, in the preface we are informed that this is a "comprehensive" study, the first of its kind "in more than fifty years." And that it is written to serve as "an introduction" to Stevenson's works and, therefore, "is free of bias, special pleading, of any criteria beyond the literary." If so, it is extremely difficult to understand why *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and "Markheim" between them claim 20 of the author's only 116 pages of criticism—more pages than all of those given to *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*, *The Master of Ballantrae*, *Weir of Hermiston*, and *The Ebb-Tide* combined. This is an extraordinary distribution of space for a work billed as comprehensive and introductory. The author nowhere cites the two articles he has written himself, on *Dr. Jekyll* and "Markheim" respectively,¹ and he should have. If he had, he could easily have referred readers to them for elaboration of points made briefly and with a greater regard for proportion and scale in the study. Moreover, there may be excellent reasons why no "comprehensive" study of Stevenson's works has appeared in fifty years. Other critics have read all the works, too, and have perhaps concluded, with equal zeal to disregard "any criteria beyond the literary," that *Treasure Island* (4 pp.) really merits more discussion than the Stevenson-Henley plays (9 pp.), and *Weir of Hermiston* (3 pp.) very much more than equal space with "Olalla" (2½ pp.)

Finally, there is the related and extremely important matter of guidance. No author of an introductory study can or should expect that his readers will not want to learn more, perhaps even about subjects the author himself touches only briefly. Nor should he neglect chances to trace or at least suggest the relations his subject has with his period, his contemporaries, and his predecessors. These are elementary principles of introduction and guidance, and this book is deficient in both respects. Readers intrigued, for example, by the remarks in Chapter 2 that Stevenson's essays have about them "elements of . . . Hazlitt's verbal and syntactic directness" (21–22)

¹ "The Anatomy of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*," *SEL*, 11 (Autumn 1971), 715–31; "Stevenson's 'Markheim': A Fictional 'Christmas Sermon,'" *NCF*, 21 (December 1966), 277–82.

or that Stevenson was fond of quoting and echoing Hazlitt are very poorly served by a footnote which carefully corrects one recent editor's mistake over one such quotation but altogether omits mention of E. M. Clark's detailed study of the influence of Hazlitt on Stevenson.² Similar omissions occur throughout; and even if many of the footnotes were not in addition merely self-indulgent speculations on things-in-general—"My own impression of Victorian literature, although tentative, is that it grows increasingly internal" or "The corollary of romance is pornography. . . . A vivid example of their relationship may be found in that remarkable Victorian tale of sexual adventure, *The Romance of Lust*" (149, 151)—it is difficult to regard all of the omissions as matters of taste. For an introductory study, this one is very much less helpful than it could easily have been made. As for Stevenson's relations to his contemporaries and predecessors it suffices merely to note that Henry James is mentioned three times (his friendship with Stevenson not at all), Scott and Wilde three times apiece (always in passing) and that Hardy and Pater are skipped altogether. Or as an instance of the kind of literary history readers of this study are given, to cite the author's remark: "As a romancer, Stevenson placed himself in opposition to the major literary currents of the late nineteenth century" (19). The term "major," it is true, may be an equivocation. It may denote only value, not prominence. But even so, few readers of Kenneth Graham's discussion of the "reaction against analysis" in the late nineteenth century³—or readers of Haggard, Kipling, or Hardy—are likely to find "romance" quite so minor a trend.

The author's greatest disservice to his readers, though, is not in his sins of omission. It is in his derision, in effect his dismissal as not even worth consulting, of the two really important sources of information we now have about Stevenson's life and career: Graham Balfour's 1901 biography of his cousin, and Sidney Colvin's edition of Stevenson's letters, which reaches its fullest extent in the South Seas and Tusitala editions of the 1920s. Balfour's biography no more merits derision than does Hallam Tennyson's *Memoir* of his father (1897), like Balfour's a two-volume work written by a relative at

² Evert M. Clark, "The Kinship of Hazlitt and Stevenson," *Univ. of Texas Bulletin: Studies in English*, 4 (1924), 97-114. See also: Stuart Robertson, "Sir Thomas Browne and R. L. Stevenson," *JEGP*, 20 (1921), 371-84.

³ Kenneth Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel 1865-1900* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), Chap. 3, "The Rise of the Romance," pp. 61-70.

the turn of the century and within less than a decade of the subject's death. For the biography itself Tennysonianians turn to Sir Charles (1949). The parallel is exact, or it ought to be. Balfour is amazingly accurate and copious on facts, and he includes pages of material never since reprinted. J. C. Furnas's *Voyage to Windward* (1951) fills in the gaps. Derision is arrogant, misleading, and extremely unhelpful. The same is true of Colvin's edition of the letters: more than one thousand pages of well-indexed material derided in this study as "letters that pose as complete" (18), which in any event they never did, and as having been "carefully" edited to forward a view of Stevenson which is "as much a fabrication as Balfour's" (138n). This is all we are told. Yet if one compares, for example, Colvin's version of the Stevenson-Baxter correspondence with the more complete version edited by Ferguson and Waingrow (1956) what actually appears is not wholesale suppression or cynical fabrication but deletion of the tedious, the merely ephemeral, and of biographical (not literary) material which many persons still living in the early 1900s had a perfect right to feel aired dirty linen in public to no good purpose from any point of view. The "missing" material, almost all of it, was in any event available to J. C. Furnas—this is one merit of his biography—and, more recently, much of it has again been sorted through by the late James Pope-Hennessy for his own biography of Stevenson (1974) and by Edward Cohen in reviewing the Stevenson-Henley quarrel both in the pages of this journal and in a University of Florida monograph (1974). There is simply no good reason to imply, least of all in an introductory study aimed as this one is at a very broad spectrum of readers, that everything really worth knowing has been left out. It hasn't been. This author is not only careless about facts, he is also in the grip of a number of fashionable—and dangerous—scholarly misconceptions.

There are good things scattered here and there throughout this study, interesting ideas whose presence makes one regret all the more its numerous deficiencies. Here are six of them, with which I will end. All are worth patient and thoughtful exploration, by this author, one hopes, and by others. In the present study, unfortunately, they are little more than stated. (1) Escape, for Stevenson, is always both deliberate and temporary. The arcadias projected in his essays and travel-books are real, and they are absorbing; but it is always clear that such refuges are exceptional, that the world is not arcadian

at all, and that even one's own absorption must soon enough, and inevitably, end. (2) Stevenson's dramatic protagonists, Deacon Brodie and Robert Macaire especially, are better described as rascals than as villains. Rather than early versions of such tormented Stevensonian figures as Henry Jekyll and the Master of Ballantrae, they are essentially picaresque figures espousing a cavalier freedom from merely social restraints. (3) *A Child's Garden of Verses* gains much of its appeal from an alternation of moods. "Childhood delight" coexists with "simultaneous sadness" as the child is sometimes shown happy and sometimes "in a world from which he is often painfully apart." (4) Stevenson's stories, "Providence and the Guitar" for example, sometimes unfold as "fictionalized essays." Similar ideas are developed in a very similar general manner. (5) Stevenson's adventure-novels do not evade but actually depict metaphorically the grim realities of the late-Victorian world. All of them "present a world . . . in which primitive passion, impulsive action, and casual betrayal are a way of life." (6) *The Wrecker* is a corrosive counterpart of *Treasure Island*. Stevenson not only "reduces the treasure hunt to a business enterprise and the treasure to a product of commercial instinct," he "builds up a brilliant panorama of expectation only to conclude upon the etheriality of a burst bubble." *The Ebb-Tide*, similarly, is "the death-cry of romance, an apocalyptic vision where daydream turns to nightmare and El Dorado becomes the pestilential domain of a maniacal dictator." All six of these ideas merit exploration. It is only to be regretted that the present study does so little to encourage anyone to do so. Stevenson really is worth reading.

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